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## Orion Edgar, Things Seen and Unseen: The Logic of Incarnation in Merleau-Ponty's Metaphysics of Flesh

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**Things Seen and Unseen: The Logic of Incarnation in Merleau-Ponty's Metaphysics of Flesh**, Orion Edgar, James Clarke & Co, 2016 (ISBN 978-0-227-17594-1), 273 pp., Pb £22.75.

Modern French philosophy has continued in the shadow of Descartes, with key figures like Levinas and Derrida seeking to rescue the thinking subject from his isolation by relating him to other subjects via the face, language, hospitality and similar forms of encounter. These encounters are, of course, embodied: my face is part of my body, language requires the physical movement of jaw and vocal chords, and in acts of welcome physical boundaries are inevitably transgressed. In so many expositions, however, the body seems to remain implicit. Against this backdrop, the oeuvre of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) deserves to be better known in the English-speaking world. The real strength of his philosophy, and of this engagement with it, is the metaphysical centrality granted to the body.

In his major systematic study *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty establishes the commonality of human life not by trying to make abstract connections between isolated minds but by showing that embodiment is fundamentally shared, preceding communication. This trajectory out of Cartesianism from the side not of mind but of matter is theologically suggestive. Orion Edgar follows it by focusing on Merleau-Ponty's posthumous and unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*, which goes beyond the straightforward realism that some readers may take from his *Phenomenology*. He traces an 'incarnational understanding which is never brought to completion but which is continually reworked and refined' (p. 1).

In chapter 1, the contours of Merleau-Ponty's embodied philosophy are outlined. Humans are body-subjects in whom the subject-object opposition is dissolved. The example of one of my hands touching my other hand shows that I am simultaneously the subject and the object of my perceptions. Analogous illustrations could be drawn from the other senses, such as closing one eye and seeing my nose, hearing my footsteps or tasting my perspiration. Edgar deploys Merleau-Ponty to rehabilitate vision as the primary sense. Because it operates across large distances and is relatively comprehensive, vision unifies the world more than any other sense. Even so, this unification is achieved from a given position and requires perceptual faith: as Husserl so clearly understood, no object may be perceived comprehensively. For this reason if no other, sense is a unity—like vision itself, which is given by two separate organs. It is also intentional, as implied by the French *sens*, which entails direction rather than the passive reception of sense data. Faithful perception suggests a Heideggerian recognition of transcendence as the depth and re-enchantment of the world.

Suspending close engagement with Merleau-Ponty, chapter 2 offers a constructive excursus on eating. With Spinoza, Edgar contends that the fundamental mode of human desiring is appetite. Relating desire to eating is instructive because it demonstrates how desire ‘rests upon culture, geography, agriculture, and my personal tastes, as well as a certain kind of whim’ (p. 49). Moreover, although eating is in one aspect the satisfaction of hunger, by engaging the intimate senses of taste and touch it shows how these are rooted in society and politics. Chapter 3 locates Merleau-Ponty in the context of debates about perspective, light and lenses. As the linear perspective of Descartes’s *Optics* became dominant, the notion that perception is an event, an encounter, between person and object became lost. Yet taking seriously our existence as perceiving beings, Edgar hints, has tremendous implications for how we humans see our place in the world. By reconnecting with our animality, we reconsider the status of other animals. By overturning the Cartesian distinction between mental substance and extended substance, we are provoked to reflect again, as did Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, on the nature and emergence of consciousness.

In chapter 4, titled ‘Restoring sight to the blind’, Edgar develops the implications of this philosophy for how we see. Although any true act of perception refutes a simplistic subject-object dualism, such an act is not itself synthetic, being grounded in what Merleau-Ponty terms ‘work already completed . . . a general synthesis constituted once and for all’ (p. 111). This imbricated science, sedimented in the world but also in me, teaches me habits of perception for which the Platonic theory of extramission—according to which my eyes emit rays of light that strike external objects of perception—serves as a useful metaphor. My perception of even a mundane item, such as a plate, integrates a complex set of perspectival shapes.

The final two chapters, 5 and 6, bring what Edgar terms Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of flesh into dialogue with the theology of the incarnation. Christ takes life in the depth of things as their logos, rising, as do humans, out of a depth of embodiment. This suggests that truths about Christ need to be adduced from the world rather than being derived from revelation of an abstract kind. Importantly though, this fleshly metaphysics does not issue in a radical phenomenology of flesh, as with Michel Henry. Rather, it draws us back beneath immanence into a properly Catholic sacramental ontology, in which flesh is the meeting point of, as the Nicene Creed puts it, ‘all things visible and invisible’. It might be added that this Johannine view of the flesh associates Merleau-Ponty with a strong Patristic tradition of the Eucharist as bringing fleshly, not merely bodily, participation in Christ.

Merleau-Ponty broke from the Roman Catholic Church in his twenties and his early exposure to scholastic theology accounts for his rejection of theology as a whole. Here, Edgar cumulatively fleshes out a more constructive engagement fluently, cogently, and in all senses, deeply

perceptively. Some questions remain unanswered, such as the importance of Merleau-Ponty's early and now lost work on Plotinus's intelligible multiple on his later thought, and the impact of editorial decisions on his posthumous reception. Nevertheless, we should be extremely grateful to Edgar for opening a significant new field of research, which it can only be hoped others will enter.

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